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ABSTRACT

The 1987 Commission on Undergraduate Public Relations Education report "Design for Undergraduate Public Relations Education" is examined. Much has changed since that document was published yet much remains the same. Some specific challenges to the existing document include but are not limited to these: (1) multicultural and international demands placed on public relations practice; (2) demands for accountability by college and university administrators, accrediting agencies, governmental bodies, the tax-paying population at large, as well as students and their parents; (3) dynamic tension between industry demands and the goals of public relations educators; and (4) continuing resentment of and discrimination against public relations by other mass communication and communication educators. In spirit and in its specific recommendations, the 1987 commission report is analogous to the 1990 Gold Paper No. 7 of the International Public Relations Association entitled, "Public Relations Education--Recommendations and Standards." However, the Gold Paper was far more realistic and far-sighted. A landmark "must read" book for all communication educators is R. O. Blanchard and W. G. Christ's "Media Education and the Liberal Arts: A Blueprint for the New Professionalism"--a must read because of its provocative theses. While their criticism of sequentially organized curriculums has some virtue, it could, if misapplied, take public relations programs in a direction that the authors are attempting to steer clear of, e.g., a program in which students become jacks of all trades and masters of none, a program with no discernible standards. Public relations needs to continue to assess its place in the academy and as a professional area of practice. (Includes 23 notes.) (TB)

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"1987 Revisited: Is It Time For a New Look"

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INTRODUCTION

It's little wonder that scholars and practitioners among themselves and between one another do not enjoy consensus about public relations education. An occupation that is both characteristically ill-defined and vaguely described[1] hardly encourages the explicit rigor of academic course and curriculum prescription. Yet the 1987 Commission on Undergraduate Public Relations made a noble and salutary effort to provide a superstructure built upon the best professional education in the United States at that time.

The initial Commission had been formed in the early 1970s, and its 1975 report was the first "Design for Public Relations Education." A new Commission was established in the early 1980s; in 1985, that body recommended a detailed curriculum for graduate education. The 1987 Commission on Undergraduate Public Relations Education, at its first meeting in 1984, reaffirmed the recommendations of the 1975 "Design"; however, three years later, its own report contained significant differences:

> Unlike the 1975 Commission, the sole focus of the 1987 Commission was on the undergraduate curriculum. The 1975 Commission named specific public relations courses while the 1987 Commission addressed course content which should be covered in a total public relations program.

Furthermore, to broaden its scope and to seek as much professional consensus as possible, the 1987 Commission:

> ... included representatives from the International Association of Business Communicators and its Educators Academy; the Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education; the American Marketing Association; the International Communication Association; the American Management Association (sic) and the Speech Communication Association.[2]

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[1] For a comprehensive discussion about "The Quandary of Public Relations," see Dean Kruckeberg and Kenneth Starck, *Public Relations and Community: A Reconstructed Theory* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 1-34.

[2] Commission on Undergraduate Public Relations Education, *The Design for Undergraduate Public Relations Education* (Chicago: Commission on Undergraduate Public Relations Education, 1987), 2.

The 1987 Commission countered assumptions that educators and practitioners were disagreeing about the desired content of undergraduate public relations education; rather, the Commission's research indicated that educators and practitioners were, in fact, agreeing at that time about requisite areas of study.[3] The Commission concluded:

> The fundamental purpose of undergraduate public relations education is to provide the student with a well-rounded program of study, including an area of specialization called a public relations major. The traditional arts and sciences remain the solid basis for undergraduate education of public relations students, essential to their functioning professionally in a complex society.[4]

Making no recommendation about where a public relations education program should be located (but noting that the great majority of such programs were in departments or schools of journalism and mass communication), the Commission maintained that at least 65 semester hours (94 quarter hours) should be required in liberal arts and sciences and that students should consider business as a secondary area of concentrated study. Also, 15 hours (22 quarter hours) should be in public relations professional courses.[5]

In sum, the 1987 Commission recommended that: of the typical 120 semester hours (175 quarter hours) required for a bachelor's degree, 90 semester hours (131 quarter hours) were to be other than professional education courses, with a minimum of 65 of these semester hours (94 quarter hours) to be in liberal arts and sciences. This would constitute three-fourths of the student's undergraduate education. The remaining one-fourth of this education would be in "professional" coursework (30 semester hours, or 44 quarter hours). Within this one-fourth, half of the courses were to be in communication studies (15 semester hours, or 22 quarter hours), and the remaining half would contain specific course content in public relations.[6]

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[3] Ibid., 3.

[4] Ibid., 4.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., 28.

These recommendations of the 1987 Commission were consonant with the requirement of the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, i.e., (based on 120 semester hours required for graduation) students would have to take at least 90 hours in courses outside the major area of journalism and mass communication--with at least 65 hours of these courses in basic liberal arts and sciences.[7]

Certainly in spirit, and by-and-large in its specific recommendations, the 1987 Commission report is analogous to and compatible with the September 1990 Gold Paper No. 7 of the International Public Relations Association entitled, *Public Relations Education--Recommendations and Standards.* Metaphorically describing its curricular recommendations as a series of three concentric circles, IPRA says the smallest circle encloses subjects specifically concerned with public relations practice, while the second-largest circle contains subjects in the general field of communication. The all-encompassing circle represents general liberal arts and humanities education that IPRA deems essential for a successful professional career.[8]

IPRA, likewise, recognized that the interdisciplinary nature of public relations and the philosophical differences among universities meant public relations programs would be offered in a variety of academic homes.[9]

IPRA concluded:

> We do not wish to recommend any specific home for the discipline and caution against recommending that 'Schools of Public Relations' be established, for the real public relations school is the entire university itself with its diversified facets of knowledge. We do, however, recommend that public relations be taught as an applied social science with academic and professional emphasis.[10]

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[7] Ibid., Appendix, 6.

[8] International Public Relations Association Education and Research Committee and International Public Relations Association International Commission on Public Relations Education, *Public Relations Education--Recommendations and Standards*, Gold Paper No. 7, (September 1990): 2.

[9] Ibid., 12.

[10] Ibid., 13.

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Although the 1987 Commission document might have served public relations education and U.S. society well during its initial lifespan, contemporary challenges strongly suggest that the dictates of *The Design for Undergraduate Public Relations Education* may be obsolete. Although the Commission's pedagogical philosophy may not presently be in gross diametrical error in its perspective, its criteria nevertheless must be judged as increasingly inadequate to serve the complex needs of contemporary students, the global public relations industry and world society in general.

Some specific challenges to the existing document include, but are not limited to, these: 1) multicultural and international demands placed on public relations practice; 2) demands for accountability by college and university administrators, accrediting agencies, governmental bodies, the tax-paying population at large, as well as students and their parents; 3) a dynamic tension between industry demands and the goals of public relations educators; and 4) continuing resentment of and discrimination against public relations by other mass communication and communication educators.

Multicultural and International Demands:

Sriramesh and White contend that, because a society's culture affects the pattern of communication among members of that society, such culture would have a direct impact on the public relations practice of that society's organizations. The authors contend this is because public relations is first and foremost a communication activity.[11]

A major criticism of the 1987 document is its provinciality and parochialism--even for its time, in which the future demographic diversity of the United States was already being projected and in which the increasing internationalism of business and other organizations had become a foregone assumption. Commendably, the Commission sought out representatives from the International Association of Business Communicators and the International Communication Association; however, global dialogues with regional public relations associations and educators were not fostered.

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[11] K. Sriramesh and Jon White, "Societal Culture and Public Relations," in *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, ed. James E. Grunig (Hillsdale, N. J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1992), 609.

In contrast, Gold Paper No. 7 was far more realistic and far-sighted, undoubtedly because of its cosmopolitan constituency. Recognizing that it is neither desirable nor necessary for public relations education to be uniform throughout the world (taking into consideration local and national cultures, religions and indigenous conditions),[12] the International Public Relations Association nevertheless maintained that:

> The theory of public relations is valid everywhere but its practical application must take into account national character, economy, religion and environment.
>
> IPRA's role ... is to synthesise the experience of different countries and to encourage national public relations associations to adapt the best examples from other countries to the formation of national public relations educational and professional advancement programmes best suited to their milieu.[13]

Highly sophisticated public relations is being practiced throughout the world, including in the Pacific Rim countries, the Middle East, Africa, Central and South America and Europe; yet, U.S. scholars and many North American practitioners are not cognizant of such practice that oftentimes is significantly different from U.S. practice. Concomitant public relations education--with some of its own literature and other body of knowledge--is also occurring at such loci. For example, Hazleton and Kruckeberg note that British public relations practice historically has reigned supreme in Europe because of Great Britain's close relationship with the United States and because of the linguistic advantages of its native English language. However, they argue that this supremacy could be challenged collectively by other European nation-states in the near future and that British practice may, indeed, prove inadequate and/or largely inappropriate as a unified practice develops within the European Union.

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[12]International Public Relations Association Education and Research Committee and International Public Relations Association International Commission on Public Relations Education, *Public Relations Education--Recommendations and Standards*, Gold Paper No. 7: 27.

[13]Ibid., 4.

Conversely--and in dynamic tension with the preceding scenario--European nation-states could determine that unified public relations practice--save at a highly abstract supra-national level--cannot satisfy indigenous needs; thereby, attempts to unify public relations practice would be futile.

The two authors argue that evolving European public relations practice will be influenced by the professional education of its practitioners; furthermore, public relations professionalization in some form may proceed relatively quickly as the need for public relations is being increasingly recognized throughout Europe.

However, European public relations education programs are by-and-large exclusively oriented toward preparing students for management positions, the authors note. There are no journalism schools; rather, European public relations curricula are most often located in theory-oriented mass communication programs. Nevertheless, European students receive degrees in public relations that are far more specific and in-depth than are most counterpart public relations education programs in the United States.[14]

Starck and Kruckeberg, in their discussion of mass communication and mass communication education, ponder: "Will there be a 'Europeanization' of such education and scholarship?"[15] Or, for that matter, a renewed "Europeanization" of communication theory in general? The Germans, in particular, have potential to contribute greatly to public relations because of their intellectual tradition in mass communication. Hardt observes that the history of mass communication as a field of scholarly study is much older in Germany than in the United States.[16] Carey reminds us that many of the originating impulses behind research in mass communication were German[17]

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[14]Vincent Hazleton and Dean Kruckeberg, "European Public Relations Practice: An Evolving Paradigm," in *International Public Relations*, eds. Hugh M. Culbertson and Ni Chen (Hillsdale, N. J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, in press).

[15]Kenneth Starck and Dean Kruckeberg, "Mass Communication and the International Challenge," *Phi Beta Delta International Review*, Fall 1991, 25.

[16]Hanno Hardt, *Social Theories of the Press* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, Inc., 1979), 28.

[17]James W. Carey,. "Foreword," in Hanno Hardt, *Social Theories of the Press*, 11.

And Europe is only one example of a diversity of dynamic regional public relations environments, illustrative of several throughout the world that promise to contribute much to public relations as a professional practice and a disciplinary area of study. It is myopic for U.S. educators to ignore the opportunity for dialogues with regional educators and practitioners in re-examining and re-assessing the curricular offerings of U.S. public relations education.

Demands for Accountability:

In frenzied response to a variety of increasingly vocal constituents, universities are mandating perplexing--oftentimes paradoxical--reformations within the educational establishment. Not unusual are revigorated attempts to graduate baccalaureate students in four years, during a time when declining enrollments prompt the wholesale marketing of traditional institutions of higher education to part-time students and "shoppers" who traditionally have been served by junior colleges and nontraditional urban campuses. New and innovative communication majors requiring faculty resources must compete with the renewed demands for general education. Evening and Saturday classes may have to be offered in computer laboratories which supporting student-fee money stipulates must be available at those times for general student use. Reduction of major-elective coursework to allow general elective study may only encourage declaration of a rigidly prescribed minor--defeating the intended purpose of the original reduction of major elective hours. Outcomes assessment requirements demand time that is not compensated by corresponding reductions in teaching loads.

A landmark "must read" book for all communication educators is, Robert O. Blanchard and William G. Christ, *Media Education and the Liberal Arts: A Blueprint for the New Professionalism* (Hillsdale, N. J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993). It does a superb job of outlining the history of constituent discontent, primarily from the early 1980s, and it provides a recipe for a less-fragmented and more-integrated "New Liberal Arts" and a resulting "New Professionalism," in which communication studies play a central role.

While its criticisms, both reported and proffered, are by-and-large valid for the academy at large and communication programs in general, its provocative theses--while enticing and somewhat beguiling--are flawed as they relate to public relations education.

The book should be read carefully in its entirety. However, one must conclude the authors don't understand contemporary public relations or its professional education.

Advocating an integrated, cross-industry professional, non-occupational curriculum as opposed to the fragmented sequences typical in many journalism programs,[18] the authors note:

> In an integrated, cross-industry professional, non-occupational curriculum, ... the students are preparing for more general communication or information work that can be applied on the job. Depending on the program's mission, students take a few integrated conceptual core courses and engage in some experiential learning that emphasizes familiarity and experimentation with, and understanding over (sic) technical competence of media message-making technology. But they devote most of their communication and media academic work to intellectually challenging conceptual studies of mass media and communication that provide bridges to the behavioral and social sciences, arts and humanities. They explore consciousness-raising perspectives that (sic) in turn, enhance rather than narrow their independence and options in the market....
>
> ... (S)tudents are encouraged and offered opportunities to obtain familiarity with and understanding of media technology, either in the media workshop environment or other media centers or organizations on or off campus. Occupational training is neither mandatory nor the center of the curriculum. It does not absorb a great deal of faculty time and effort, and only a little of it, if any, is for academic credit; it is mostly co-curricular. Students seek this experience on their own extra-curricular, "rest and recreation" time. By doing so, they demonstrate their interests, initiative, and motivation--attributes that cannot be taught in required, lock-step courses but that media practitioners profess to prize so highly.

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[18]Robert O. Blanchard and William G. Christ, *Media Education and the Liberal Arts: A Blueprint for the New Professionalism* (Hillsdale, N. J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993), 70.

> The New professionalism--the cross-media, liberal, integrative program--is consistent with broader undergraduate reform efforts. The danger to intellectual growth in professional programs ... is the "excessive structure and overprescription of training in currently fashionable technique, ephemeral information, and obsolescent technology"....[19]

The authors preach against sequences, observing:

> ... (S)tudents are attracted to sequences because they are there--because they exist in the catalogue. ... (S)tudents are responding to parental, peer, and other short-term social and economic pressures to answer the question: "What are you going to do after you graduate?" Sequences help give them an easy answer. Students perceive, or want to believe, that they are committed to careers in a specific field. This gives them a sense of security, something that the occupations would exploit, but that the academy should not.[20]

While the authors' point would be well-taken in several quarters, particularly so in journalism/mass communication programs, their theses--if misapplied and abused--could result in "lowest common denominator" thinking encouraging the antithesis of what Blanchard and Christ attempt to rectify, e. g., an undergraduate media program that "round-robins" students so they can become "jacks of all trades and masters of none," ideal for exploitation by small media with little hope of reaching "the big time"; unfocused--and thereby inadequate--education and less-than-expert instruction; and a program with no discernible standards that can be relied upon by potential employers.

Witness the general communication professor in my department who declared, "We are all public relations educators," to which I replied, "That's news to PRSA, the Public Relations Divisions of SCA and AEJMC and the PR Interest Group of ICA." Or, the same faculty member who suggested that public relations faculty--already stretched thin offering public relations professional courses that only they can teach competently--should take their turns teaching freshmen oral communication courses.

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[19]Ibid., 70-71.

[20]Ibid., 69.

Despite such potential misapplication and abuse of the book's recommendations, the volume's indictment is flawed in its consideration of public relations education--as noted by a telling remark the authors make about business schools:

> Business schools long ago eliminated industry-specific approaches, replacing them with generic cross-industry subjects such as accounting, management, finance, and marketing....[21]

The book fails in its understanding of and recommendations for public relations education. The authors consider and interpret a primitive model of public relations; they include public relations as part of the media industry, of which it is not! In its technician role, there is some credence to such inclusion; in the management role, there is not! Rather, public relations could more appropriately be grouped among business schools' "generic cross-industry subjects" cited by the authors, i.e., accounting, management, finance and marketing.

Furthermore, public relations education--especially as exemplified in communication-based programs--already epitomizes what the authors are advocating. Curricula typically include instruction in all types of media, i.e., electronic media and print; these curricula are multidisciplinary--including coursework, not only in applied journalism, but also in interpersonal, organizational and mass communication theory. Graduating students typically obtain entry-level positions in public relations, but are highly competitive for positions in print and electronic media, advertising, a range of business management positions as well as graduate studies in communication and in such professional areas as law.

What faculty are more multidisciplinary in their scholarship than are public relations educators, who typically are active in the Public Relations Society of America, Speech Communication Association, International Communication Association and Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication--to name only a few of a broad range of professional and scholarly associations to which many public relations educators belong?

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[21] Ibid., 70.

However, the criticisms prompt some base considerations, i.e., would public relations, especially in its manager role, be better taught in Schools of Business Administration, and should public relations--again, in its manager role--be offered at the graduate level? The former is more in keeping with contemporary public relations education, while the latter would allow for the "New Professionalism" advocated by the authors. There should be considerable debate about the former, and the latter is already in keeping with much existing thought on public relations education. With no apologies whatsoever, public relations *is* a professional area in which students--at whatever level of their education--should be prepared to enter as they are co-opted into this professional fraternity by their fellows.

Tension Between Industry Demands and Educator Goals:
Blanchard and Christ rightly observe that:

> ... (M)any in the fraternity of practitioners do not want communication and media education programs to engender the liberal ethos. They like programs that are limited. They want programs designed and named to imply to students that they must make an occupational commitment and investment by majoring in a limited field, such as newspaper or broadcast journalism, public relations, or advertising.[22]

Rather than supporting an occupational ethos, it is important that public relations educators--more in number and better qualified--do not blindly follow the dictates nor the whims of this practitioner fraternity. Instead, they must participate *as full members* of the professional community; in several critical areas, they must lead.

Resentment by Mass Communication/Communication Educators:
For many obvious reasons, public relations needs to continue to assess its place in the academy and as a professional area of practice. While it serves frequently as a "cash cow" for mass communication and communication programs enjoying its popularity and resulting enrollment figures, public relations continues to be a black sheep within communication education. Despite its legitimacy, it is still misunderstood and unaccepted, as evidenced in the Spring 1995 *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*:

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[22]Ibid.

Former editor Jacob H. Jaffe warns:

> I close this review with an appeal. Increasingly, in advertising and public relations, I witness the play of manipulation. An advancing rule everywhere, in everything is to induce or trick people into doing what the communicator wants them to do or to believe. By all sorts of deception, public relations gets much of its way into print and broadcast media. Many news stories are written out of a PR release, a PR happening, or a PR source (without any such attribution). It is easy and profitable that way for some news people, but the reader, listener, viewer, even the writer and editor can become brainwashed. With advertising and public relations consuming so much ink and airtime, what do we do about it all? The volume and the persuasiveness of that flood are so correct for reaching objectives, that the threat to democracy, journalism, and integrity could be an abomination.[23]

While this diatribe serves as an indictment of the news media as much as it attacks public relations, this observation illustrates the resentment public relations still suffers at the hands of journalism and mass communication scholars. Someday, we are all going to get mad as hell and aren't going to take it anymore!

SUMMARY

It is time to re-examine the 1987 Commission on Undergraduate Public Relations' *Design for Undergraduate Public Relations Education.* Much has changed since that document was published, yet much remains the same. Some specific challenges to the existing document include, but are not limited to, these: 1) multicultural and international demands placed on public relations practice; 2) demands for accountability by college and university administrators, accrediting agencies, governmental bodies, the tax-paying population at large, as well as students and their parents; 3) a dynamic tension between industry demands and the goals of public relations educators; and 4) continuing resentment of and discrimination against public relations by other mass communication and communication educators. Let the work begin!

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[23]Jacob H. Jaffe, "Observations on American Media in the Twentieth Century," *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator* 50 (Spring 1995): 99.